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AUTHOR Bailey, Jerry D.
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ABSTRACT

Magnet schools are designed to increase students' chances of obtaining the type of education they desire, but little is known about the actual relationship between the magnet school experience and its benefit to students once they leave it, and more research is needed. While a considerable amount has been written about the effects that magnet schools have on the quality of education, achievement questions are still fertile ones for investigation. Another need is in the area of information about students' success after leaving magnet schools. It would be helpful to know how successful the magnet experience was in fulfilling the educational and career aspirations of the students, the relationship of magnet programs to the postmagnet experience, the success of its students in achieving career objectives, or whether the magnet experience was causal to the students' ability to gain entrance into the college of his or her choice. Such information seems to be lacking in many school districts that have magnet school programs. Other research studies might usefully identify which systems developed the capacity to track students after their enrollment; compare the performance of students by feeder school, race, sex, ability, and interest; and document the progress of students over the period of time that students are enrolled in the magnets--do students do better in the second year than in the first? Finally, little is known about the basic organization of magnet schools. (KH)

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RESEARCH NEEDED TO ASSESS THE PERFORMANCE OF MAGNET SCHOOLS

Jerry D. Bailey
Associate Dean, School of Education
The University of Kansas

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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RESEARCH NEEDED TO ASSESS THE PERFORMANCE OF MAGNET SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

In Doyle and Levine's article (1984) advocating the promise of magnet schools, they state that such schools can be "powerful tools for educational change" and that they are effective, in part, as a result of the opportunities of choice for students. Indeed magnet schools are designed to increase the possibility that students can obtain the type of education they desire. However, little is known about the actual relationship between this type of schooling--the magnet experience--and its benefit to the student once he or she leaves that environment. This paper is an initial attempt at reviewing what has been written on the topic. Its second purpose is to suggest additional research questions that need attention.

RESEARCH ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

A considerable amount has been written about the effects that magnet schools have on the quality of education (for example, Blank, 1984). Most of these studies indicate that the rate of achievement among students who attend magnet schools is higher than that of students enrolled in traditional schools.

Achievement questions are still fertile ones for investigation, however. In a recent (1985) report of the Office of Educational Evaluation of the New York City Board of Education, five magnet high schools were evaluated. One set of program objectives at the schools were related to increases in achievement and attendance. Another set was developed in an effort to, when implemented, decrease the number of human relations violations in those schools. According to the findings of the study, the human relations violations did decrease in three of the five schools. However, objectives for attendance and achievement

were not met, although attendance was generally high in the magnet programs. In Rossell's study of magnet schools (1985) she could not find a single experiment, and only one quasi-experimental design, controlling for self-selection of students. "As a result, although numerous studies document that magnet school students generally have higher achievement and that they have fewer absences and suspensions, there is little evidence that magnet schools caused this because only one of the studies controlled for initial differences. Magnet schools may simply attract students with these characteristics" (page 18). Laws' paper in this volume describes a model for research on student outcomes in a local district.

NEED FOR FOLLOW-UP STUDIES

One fact remains particularly clear as a result of the search that led to the writing of this paper. If follow-up studies on students are objectives of magnet schools, they certainly are not first-order priorities. Most of the follow-up information that has been identified seems to comes as a result of accreditation requirements. And, the accrediting bodies are interested in where students go when they leave the school under review. They are not as interested in how well they do once they get there (see, for example, survey instruments prepared for schools by the North Central Association, 1983). The Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences in Kansas City, Kansas is a magnet school for academically talented students that opened in the fall of 1978. The school was created as a solution to a court desegregation mandate. It has an exemplary record of student achievement and offers high quality instruction to its students. The number of advanced placement college credits that students accrue is impressive. The list of institutions that receive its graduates includes many of our finest universities. However, little follow-up on individuals is

done. And, Sumner probably does a better job than most magnet schools in maintaining contact with its former students. The school is currently undergoing its periodic North Central Association evaluation. As a part of this evaluation, a questionnaire was sent to all of the graduates of the Academy using their last known address. A total of 358 questionnaires were returned. "Based solely upon the surveys that were completely returned, 80% of the graduates will obtain some type of college degree in a period of 5 years... Several of the students indicated that they had received or were working towards a master's degree.... At this time 90-95% of the 1986 graduates indicate their desire to continue their education" (Sumner, 1987, page 7). Certainly these figures are higher than the rates for the district at large. However, it would be helpful to know how successful the magnet experience was in fulfilling the educational and career aspirations of the student, the relationship of magnet program to the postmagnet experience, the success of its students in achieving career objectives, or whether the magnet experience was causal to the students' ability to gain entrance into the college of his or her choice.

This lack of information seems to be prevalent in many school districts that have magnet school programs. The 1983 evaluation of the magnet school programs of the Los Angeles Unified School District suggests almost parenthetically in one brief paragraph (on the 64th of 65 total pages) that "while limited information was available on postsecondary opportunities due to recent establishment of most senior high school programs and a limited number of twelfth grade students, the majority of seniors sampled reported that they expected to receive a high school diploma. Further about 70% expected to pursue some type of postsecondary education. However, due to missing data, it was not possible to assess their preparation or eligibility for these pursuits" (Los Angeles, 1983).

As part of the preparation for this paper the abstracts of the funded proposals under the current cycle of the Magnet School Assistance Program were reviewed. This program funds projects in 44 districts from 21 states. The projects impact magnet school programs in 350 schools that enroll well over 200,000 students. In none of the proposal abstracts were follow-up studies indicated as activities. Six follow-up phone calls were made to project directors. All indicated that there was a need to investigate postmagnet outcomes. Five directors indicated that "not much" was currently being done to assess the impact of the magnet school experience on students after they had left the experience. One district, Montclair, New Jersey has awarded a contract to the Educational Testing Services for an evaluation study of the magnet programs. In one part of the study, qualitative data gained primarily through interviews will attempt to gauge the impact of the magnet experience. The strategy being employed is that the researchers will interview individuals in the Chamber of Commerce and the business community to gain their perspective on the effectiveness of the schools. Please note that the ETS proposal does not suggest that it will interview former students. No emphasis is placed on attempting to gauge the degree to which the students' expectations were met by the preparation that they received in the magnet schools.

The seemingly significant factor in the review of all of the proposal abstracts is this lack of emphasis by districts on following up students that have left their experiences. It may be that follow-up studies, outside of those done as a part of accreditation process, just are not being done in any of the schools in the districts as the emphasis is placed on evaluating students while they are in school. And, much of this lack in the magnet schools may be attributed to the fact that many of these programs are currently being implemented and few students exist on which to follow-up. However, it is important

that researchers, program evaluators and/or others look at the impact of this exceedingly important innovation in education practice.

The scope of the literature review for this paper was limited. It is possible that some school districts have conducted effective follow-up studies on their magnet school graduates. Frankly, the researcher doubts that they have. However, a much broader based quantitative and qualitative study needs to be done to ascertain the extent of such district-level efforts. Such a study would include, in survey format, questions that could determine if districts attempt to measure whether students, once they have left, believe that their educational and career aspirations have been met. If such perceptual data are gathered, do students from magnets differ from their nonmagnet colleagues? What data exist that show that educational and workplace performance of magnet graduates exceeds that of other graduates? Once it is determined where such school district information exists, then researchers can begin to ask the necessary second- and third-level sets of questions--what research questions were in fact asked? how was the information gathered and analyzed? for what purposes were the studies generated? are they at all comparable? Only at the point that such questions can be answered is it possible to ask if magnets generally are causal to an enhanced educational and career quality of life for graduates.

The only major study most people reference in discussing magnet schools is the Blank, et al. Survey of Magnet Schools: Analyzing a Model for Quality Integrated Education (1983). The study shows that magnet schools can have a significant positive impact on district-wide desegregation efforts, that they can help reduce community conflict, and that they can promote racial integration. As a strategy for desegregation magnets are promising. However, studies which demonstrate that magnet environments impact students in such a way that

they are more understanding, more tolerant, and more vocal in promoting equal opportunity after they leave the magnet probably do not exist. If schools are to serve society in such a fashion, we should ask such research questions.

OTHER AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

Magnet schools, as has been suggested, offer considerable promise as options to help students become all that they can be. Certainly, the existing evidence, though scanty, is encouraging. However, major questions will remain unanswered. Many of these questions can not be answered unless districts make conscious efforts to develop the kind of institutional research infrastructure that creates and maintains adequate data bases. These efforts take talent, time and money, resources that are scarce in most environments. This section reviews briefly some of the general areas that deserve attention. The reader will note that several of these topics and mentioned in other papers in this volume.

In most districts, central office personnel have responsibilities in the recruitment and selection of students for their magnet schools. All too often, districts do not pay enough attention to those students once they are enrolled. It would be very helpful if systems developed the capacity to track students after their enrollment. Basic studies comparing the performance, academic as well as otherwise, of students from different "feeder" schools, race, sex, ability and interest could prove helpful not only to the research community but also to other educators, patrons, and judges. Districts should be able to document the progress of students over the period of time that students are enrolled in the magnets--do students do better the second year (or the third) they are in the magnet than the first? Comparisons of student outcome data on achievement, attendance, and discipline across magnet schools, as well as non-magnets, is essential if truly wide-spread implementation of magnet is to be considered.

Little about magnet schools is known about a variety of basic organizational questions. Which magnet themes offer the greatest promise in what kinds of districts? How are community needs best assessed in determining these themes? What recruitment and selection strategies work best for which themes in what kinds of communities? Do some strategies work better than others to facilitate desegregation? What effective staffing strategies have been implemented to assure that the magnet has a chance to succeed while, at the same time, protecting the quality of the programs in the non-magnet buildings? Curtis (1986) suggests that most secondary-level performing arts magnets are smaller than comprehensive urban high schools--is size, or commitment of faculty, or pupil-teacher ratio, the reason why a magnet is successful? Perhaps. The investigation of these questions, and the use of the resulting information, can not help but assist school districts become more successful in the educating of their students.

CONCLUSION

Issues of quality, choice, and equal opportunity are inextricably intermingled. They will not go away. We have the opportunity to make major policy recommendations about the promise of magnet environments in resolving the conflict that frequently surrounds these issues. However, we should make these recommendations based on the results of reputable studies. These studies should help answer the unresolved questions relating to the impact of the magnet experience.

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